Jack Anderson FEB 29 1976

Howard Hughes Revisited

The world has caught only fleeting glimpses of Howard Hughes since he disappeared into his penthouse some 18 years ago. Now government agents have joined in the guessing game. Was this the real Howard Hughes or an imposter who showed himself briefly to outsiders? Is the world's richest recluse dead or alive?

The mystery mogul, a master of the dark arts of making money, became rich beyond comprehension in his early life. He also won fame as a test pilot and a movie producer. He was tall, lean, dark and heavy lidded in those days, widely suspected of intimacies with women of rare beauty and loose reputation.

But he was always a bit quirky and reclusive, with an aura of personal mystery and privacy. I got to know him in the late 1940s. Of all the prominent figures I have known, only John F. Kennedy equalled Hughes in his quick and incisive grasp. But Hughes was a distracting person, alternately brooding and fidgeting. He had dark eyes, I remember, sharp but cold eyes that seemed to lack the faintest sparkle of frivolity.

After he shut the door behind him, I received two or three messages from him through third parties. Then silence. His dramatic departure from Las Vegas in late 1970 again aroused my interest. I made a few inquiries and reported on Dec. 9, 1970:

"One member of his inner circle, who claims to have seen Hughes within the past two months, described him as an emaciated invalid with white hair down to his shoulders, shaggy eyebrows, a straggly beard and grotesquely long fingernails and toenails."

He lodged in a series of penthouses in Nassau, Managua, Vancouver, London and now Acapulco. From behind guarded doors, he supposedly has been guiding his vast, $2 billion empire which ranges from gambling palaces to secret spy ships.

Hughes' arrival in Nassau has been described by Lou Crosson, who was then the U.S. consul. "When the time came for Hughes to leave the aircraft," states a confidential memo giving Crosson's recollections, "(everyone) had to walk about 50 feet away and turn their backs before he would come out. Crosson said he heard the rumble of the wheelchair being trundled aboard the van. Then the van left and everyone else departed."

According to the memo, two FBI agents showed up a few days later to investigate suspicions that Hughes may have been kidnapped from Las Vegas. Although they never saw Hughes, they spoke to his associate and "left satisfied there was nothing to the charges."

Hughes departed the Bahamas in the early morning of Feb. 17, 1972, in an 83-foot, converted Coast Guard cutter. The skipper, Bob Rehak, said the recluse was brought to the boat on a stretcher-like wheelchair. According to Rehak, Hughes had hair down to his shoulders, a stringy beard and yellowed, curling toenails about two inches long.

Not until March, 1972, did anyone outside his tight personal circle meet with him face to face. He had stayed in the pyramid-like Intercontinental Hotel in Managua where he demanded his own auxiliary generator and a private communications hook-up. The latter alone cost Hughes $10,200 a month.

Before Hughes flew off to Vancouver, he invited President Anastasio Somoza and U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton to meet him aboard his Gulfstream executive jet parked on a runway at Managua's airport. Both men accepted the strange invitation but returned more the press almost no details about the meeting.

But I have seen a confidential government document, with Shelton's detailed account of the 90-minute visit. "Hughes walked to the door of the plane and shook hands firmly," Shelton reported. "Hughes was about six feet, three inches tall, very thin, weighing from 140-150 pounds, graying hair and neatly trimmed Van Dyke type beard."

Throughout their talk, Hughes wore beat up slippers and an old robe. Shelton suggested that the entire outfit "would have gone at a bargain basement for about 80 cents."

Hughes, who had become [illegible] hearing during his early fascination with airplanes, complained that he had tried 40 or 50 different types of hearing aides but had "found none to be completely satisfactory." He asked an aide to bring him an older device, which the billionaire himself had repaired with a screwdriver the previous night. After placing it in his ear, he was able to carry on a normal conversation with Shelton and Somoza.

Hughes seemed to enjoy his short visit with outsiders. "Don't rush off," he told his guests. "This plane isn't going anywhere until I tell it to." The mystery man then continued a wide-ranging discourse on aviation, his round-the-world flight in the [illegible] flying in the Bahamas and communications satellites.

At one point, he explained why he had become a recluse. "There was a time when he had been actively engaged in designing and inventing," Shelton recounted. "Hughes had gotten sick and tired of all the [illegible] taking telephone calls and meeting the people who wanted to see him. He just decided to make himself inaccessible so that he could enjoy the solitude required to work on his inventions."

Shelton reported that Hughes felt his retreat from the world "was a mistake, but he so enjoyed the freedom from interruption ... (that) he found it extremely difficult to change."

Hughes was next reported holed up in the towering Bayshore Inn in Vancouver, British Columbia. But no one saw him. "We didn't have any reported sightings," the former hotel manager, Warren Anderson, told my associate Bob Owens. Anderson added apologetically: "I honestly don't know" if Hughes was really there.

The story was the same at London's posh Inn at the Park Hotel. For almost a year, the eccentric billionaire remained closeted in his suite overlooking picturesque Hyde Park. He used a private communications network and closed circuit TV cameras monitored all entrances and exits.

He reportedly left the hotel several times to travel about London in a limousine with drawn curtains, supposedly slipping in and out of the hotel by private elevator.

He had two visitors from Nevada on St. Patrick's eve, 1973 — Gov. Mike O'Callaghan and Gaming Board Chairman Phil Hannifin. The governor later called he had a gray beard and also reported: "He had a fine complexion. His eyes were bright. His conversation was intelligent and relevant."

Two New Yorkers, stockbroker [illegible] Sedlmayr and attorney T. [illegible] Ivey, had a business [illegible] Hughes in September 1[illegible] refused to comment on his [illegible]

Despite these brief [illegible] the outside world, [illegible] agents are still [illegible] help wondering wh[illegible] sat down with Hughes [illegible]

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